

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Nicholas Codd ?-1824

Nicholas Codd remains an enigmatic figure in the architecture of early nineteenth century Maine. He is credited with building some of the state's most elaborate Federal period residences, yet little about him can be documented. What is known suggests that he was an important member of the remarkable community of Irish emigrants who settled in the Newcastle area beginning in the late eighteenth century. For them he built St. Patrick's Church in Damariscotta Mills (1803-08), the oldest surviving Catholic house of worship in New England.

Codd worked as a carpenter or joiner and is identified in contemporary sources as a housewright. Like many housewrights, however, he may have been called upon to provide plans, but no drawings by Codd have been found.¹ It is therefore unclear as to just how much of Codd's work represents his own inclinations, and how much reflects the desires of his clients, that

group of wealthy traders allied by business, kinship, and ethnicity throughout the mid-Maine coast who employed him in their ambitious building projects.

Nicholas Codd's date and place of birth cannot be established with certainty. It is possible that he was the Nicholas Codd, son of Thomas Codd, baptized August 24, 1761, at Wexford, Ireland.² Codd is a common surname in the southeastern part of the country, the same general area from which two of Codd's principal patrons are known to have emigrated.³ Codd's 1824 obituary gives his age as seventy which would seem to place his birth too early to be the child whose baptism was recorded above.⁴ However, information supplied by Codd himself to American authorities as a resident alien in 1812, at the outbreak of hostilities with Great Britain, lists his age as fifty which accords nicely with the 1761 baptismal record.⁵

According to his 1812 deposition, Codd had been in the United States for sixteen years, placing the time of his emigration as 1795 or 96. The 1798 Boston Directory lists Codd as a housewright residing on



Figure 1. Matthew Cottrill House, Damariscotta, 1960 view by Cervin Robinson (Historic American Buildings Survey).

Pleasant Street. Nicholas Codd was married in Boston to Margaret Coffin of Nantucket on September 8, 1800.⁶ Their son Nicholas was baptized there on July 18, 1801.⁷ The first evidence of his residing in Maine is the record of the baptism of a son John Carroll Codd at Damariscotta Mills on October 11, 1803. Bishop Carroll of Baltimore officiated at this event.⁸

The earliest building associated with Codd's name was the house built for Matthew Cottrill in what is now Damariscotta in 1801 (Figure 1).⁹ Cottrill (c. 1764-1828) and James Kavanaugh (1756-1828) had emigrated together from Ireland to Boston in 1780 or 1781. They had settled in Newcastle by 1788 and quickly established themselves as leading entrepreneurs. They held important mill privileges, built and owned ships, and were prominent merchants.¹⁰ Set on a high brick foundation, Cottrill's house was wooden, two stories in height, with a very low-pitched hipped roof. The street front is flush-boarded with a prominent projecting belt course carried around the clapboarded end walls. Its front door is sheltered by a semi-circular portico supported by two fluted Doric columns. The top of the portico is accessible by an arched window from the second story. Inside, the principal stairs are curved with a central landing.

In 1803-04 James Kavanaugh built an even more imposing residence in the village of Damariscotta Mills in Newcastle (Figure 2). Kavanaugh's house, like Cottrill's, was wooden and two stories high. Both its entrance front and the side facing the village are flush-boarded with prominent belt courses like the Cottrill House. Unlike the Cottrill House, both sides of the facade have Doric pilasters set at their extremities. The Kavanaugh House has a balustrade around its roof and an octagonal cupola placed so that an angle rather than a flat wall with a window lines up with the central bay of the entrance facade. The portico of the house is semi-circular, echoing the Cottrill House's but with unfluted columns. The doorway is topped with a small fanlight, and the sidelights are fully-detached narrow windows. Above is a Palladian window.

The Kavanaugh House has a semi-circular staircase centered under the cupola. The lower newel contains an ivory inlay bearing the initials "NC", a unique instance in Federal period Maine where the executant signed his work in this manner. Set into the ceiling above the staircase is a skylight consisting, most remarkably, of a thick piece of glass that forms part of the floor of the cupola itself. The large parlor to right of the entrance features a rear wall with a central doorway flanked by arched niches fitted with shelves. The whole is framed by four fluted Doric pilasters. The mantel has reeded consols under the shelf and is topped by an overmantel with shallow sunken panels outlined with flat reeded moldings (Figure 3).

Another house in Damariscotta Mills that bore similar features to the Cottrill and Kavanaugh Houses was the now demolished Nathaniel Butler House, reputedly built in 1801. This curious house was three stories high and combined a low hipped roof with a central

chimney. Its front doorway was similar to that of the Kavanaugh House with its detached sidelights. There is evidence that it once had a portico whose roof was reached by a fanlight doorway at second floor level like that at the Cottrill House.¹¹

St. Patrick's Church in Damariscotta Mills was the second Catholic church to be built in the village (Figure 4). The first was a wooden structure dedicated to St. Mary, built in 1798.¹² As early as 1800, a replacement was contemplated, described in a letter to Bishop Carroll as "a good brick church...which would cost at the lowest estimate four or five thousand dollars".¹³ The foundations of the new church were laid in 1803 on a lot deeded by James Kavanaugh.¹⁴ The construction of the walls began in 1806, and the church was consecrated on July 17, 1808.¹⁵ Father Cheverus, who officiated at the ceremony, pronounced it "on the whole a very neat and elegant chapel".¹⁶

The church was originally a simple brick rectangle eighty feet long and twenty-five feet wide with an attached wooden vestry. Below the eaves runs a wide wooden frieze with an incised pattern of triglyphs and paterae. The sides of the church are fifteen feet high and are pierced by five arched windows. The front gable was fitted with a semi-circular lunette which survives inside today, hidden by the tower added in 1866.¹⁷

The interior has a segmental-vaulted ceiling and a small gallery over the entrance that rests on two wooden piers, which were restored in 1970. The altar displays a tapered bombe' shape. Its surface is reeded horizontally and bears a carved representation of the Lamb of God. The whole is surrounded by a flat border with carved foliage.¹⁸ The openings that flank the altar have overdoors with shallow relief carvings of a harp surmounting an olive branch, a poignant reminder of the congregation's Irish roots (Figure 5).

During the extended period of time that St. Patrick's was being built, Nicholas Codd was probably employed to build two, possibly four, houses outside of Newcastle. The Joseph T. Wood House in Wiscasset, built in 1804-05, is smaller than the Kavanaugh House and has Corinthian pilasters flanking its facade.¹⁹ Prior to being remodeled in 1858, it had a flush-boarded front with a fanlight doorway below a Palladian window and a balustrade.²⁰ Inside, the Wood House's semi-circular staircase rises into an octagonal cupola, placed in the same eccentric manner as that on the Kavanaugh House.

Long attributed to Codd is the Thomas McCobb House built in Phippsburg in 1806.²¹ The McCobb House is roughly equivalent to the Kavanaugh House in scale, but differs from it significantly in the level and manner of its detailing. The two principal fronts of the McCobb House have wooden oval plaques carved with swags over the first floor windows, the only known instance of this Boston-style detailing in Maine. The two fanlight entrances are sheltered by cornices supported on carved consols. The roof is balustraded and features an octagonal cupola.

The McCobb House, like most of the houses attributed to Codd, possesses a semi-circular central stair. The stair was taken down and re-erected to face the opposite end of the hall in 1926, after the house had been barged to Rockport and enlarged.²² On the whole, the interiors of the house are well preserved. Details such as mantels and door casings are drawn from Asher Benjamin's *The American Builder's Companion*, published in Boston the year of the McCobb House's construction.

Another house in the vicinity of Wiscasset that bears a resemblance to examples of Nicholas Codd's supposed work is the Stephen Parsons House in Edgecomb. Parsons purchased an unfinished house in 1805 and completed it in 1806.²³ The Parsons House is a rather plain, two story, hipped-roof, wooden structure, but the singularity of its plan and various details of its interior suggest that someone of Codd's caliber was employed in its layout and finish. Particularly noteworthy is the best parlor with an extraordinary coved ceiling and pair of false windows in its rear wing fitted up with bookshelves that recall the parlor of the Kavanaugh House.

The grandest house ascribable to Codd is the incomparable Nickels-Sortwell House in Wiscasset, begun in 1807. Cobb has been put forward as the builder of the Nickels-Sortwell House in the past, but it has only recently been pointed out that Captain William Nickels' wife Jane was the sister of Thomas McCobb of Phippsburg.²⁴ Nickels' son, writing in 1858, stated that his father "procured one of the best architects that the State had at that time produced" and noted that his father's aim had been to surpass, among others, the house of Joseph T. Wood.²⁵ The Nickels House was apparently under construction for several years. William Nickels, Jr. wrote: I have a recollection that the carpenter was at work on the front part of it after we moved in it, and I am confident it was finished before the War of 1812, about which time my Mother died.²⁶

The Nickels House is three stories in height with a lower three-story wing attached to the left rear. The facade is flush-boarded. Its three central bays have Corinthian pilasters applied to the upper stories above an arcaded base. The fanlight entrance is prefaced by an elaborate six-column portico with composite collonettes. Above is a Palladian window with a semi-circular lunette at third floor level. The imposts of the arches, the main cornice and the surrounds of the door and the windows above are treated with the utmost richness of detailing. The Nickels House resembles the now demolished Matthew Cobb House of 1801 in Portland, designed and built by Alexander Parris. Both, in turn, are similar to the John Pierce House of 1799 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and ultimately owe their arrangement of pilasters over an arcaded base to houses in Charles Bulfinch's Franklin Place, Boston, built in 1793-94.

Features of the Nickels House plan again suggest the use of Benjamin's *The American Builder's Companion*.

The idea of extending the larger parlor the entire depth of the block to the right of the entrance may have come from the plan of a "Design for a House intended for the country". The use of a wide opening (filled originally with folding doors) between the rooms on the other side of the hall is similar to several plans illustrated by Benjamin and is typical of the type of inter-connecting planning of rooms then coming into general use in larger houses. The interior detailing of the Nickels House shows a similar dependence on Benjamin's book as does the McCobb House. The reeded doorcasings in the lower hall are particularly lavish examples of this. The crowning feature of the Nickels House's interior is the semi-elliptical staircase which rises to the third story and is topped by a shallow elliptical dome and skylight. These stairs are the most extensive of their kind in Maine and are among the finest products of the Federal period stair builder's art in New England.

Nicholas Codd's last years in Maine are almost a complete mystery. He is listed as a resident of New-castle in the 1810 Census and was living there two years later when he was interviewed by the authorities as a resident alien. At that time he listed his occupation as "merchant", perhaps reflecting a temporary change of occupation accompanying the slump in building resulting from the Embargo Act of 1807. Two houses in Lincoln County built in the early 1810s do suggest Codd's hand, however. Abiel Wood, Jr., Joseph T. Wood's brother, began construction of a three-story house in Wiscasset about 1811. It is flush-boarded on three sides and possesses a Palladian window and lunette resembling those on the Nickels House, but lacks the latter's pilastered centerpiece. This house is reputed to have remained unfinished until the 1820s, after Codd is known to have removed from the region.²⁷ In 1814 Isaac Reed of Waldoboro built a house whose semi-circular front portico resembles those of the Cottrill and Kavanaugh Houses. The Reed House has the added feature of a one-story curved bay attached to its right side. These houses may have been built or at least begun, in the case of the Abiel Wood, Jr., House, by Codd, or they may represent the emulation of his work by other clients and builders.

Codd returned to Boston by 1818, where he is listed that year in the Boston Directory as a housewright residing on Cross Street. In 1820 and 1821, he is listed as the proprietor of a boarding house on Devonshire Street, but in 1822 and 1823 he reappears as a housewright. No buildings connected with Codd in his last years have been identified. He died on September 9, 1824, and was buried with many another "native of Ireland" in the cemetery of St. Augustin's Church in South Boston.²⁸

A remarkable feature of Nicholas Codd's work is that it betrays so few characteristics of his homeland and lies squarely within the traditions of contemporary New England. The motifs employed in his buildings, such as the use of facade pilasters, are direct reflections of an established Boston-area style, while his



Figure 2. James Kavanaugh House, Damariscotta Mills, 1960 view by Cervin Robinson (HABS).



Figure 3. Kavanaugh House, Northeast Parlor, 1960 view by Cervin Robinson (HABS).



Figure 4. St. Patrick's Church, Damariscotta Mills, circa 1875 view (MHPC).

choice of Asher Benjamin-derived details does not differ fundamentally from the practices of hundreds of other Federal period builders throughout New England. One wonders just what training Codd had received in Ireland, or, indeed, if he worked as a builder there at all. With the exception of St. Patrick's Church, all of Codd's presumed works are built of wood. Large-scale building with timber had virtually ceased in Ireland in the seventeenth century in favor of brick and stone. This suggests that Codd must have had to learn traditional New England framing and construction techniques at the least. His apparent proficiency as a stair builder is one suggestion that he was, indeed, trained as a joiner in his earlier days.

Only a few features in the houses attributed to Codd suggest a specifically Irish origin. The detached side lights seen in the Kavanaugh House and the Butler House (where they appear in connection with an arched central window at third floor level) are a common feature of Irish Georgian houses. Yet there is no evidence to connect Codd with the most Irish-looking house in the region, the second Silas Lee House of 1807 in Wiscasset, later remodeled and now known as "Castle Tucker". Originally this singular brick house, with its three-story central section flanked by two-story curved extensions, resembled the now demolished eighteenth-century house "Mantua", near Dublin.²⁹ The Lee House, on the other hand, may reflect more the advanced taste of its well-traveled owner than that of an immigrant carpenter.³⁰ Its flying staircase with its semi-circular twist at the bottom, however, bespeaks the hand of an expert stair-builder, leaving open the possibility of Nicholas Codd's involvement with one more of Maine's most outstanding early nineteenth-century structures.

NOTES

- ¹ James A. Hall, "Historical Address", *Centennial Celebration at Damariscotta and Newcastle, July 4th, 1876*, Waldoboro, 1876, p. 12, says of the Kavanaugh Mansion in Damariscotta Mills, "It [sic] architect was one Nicholas Cod [sic] an Englishman". The designation of Codd as an architect, in the modern sense of the word, is incorrect. That Codd was Irish seems certain.
- ² Wexford town (Ireland) parish records. Edward T. McCarron (among others) has researched Codd's origins in Ireland, and the author gratefully acknowledges his sharing the fruits of his research. The record of Codd's marriage in Nantucket lists him as the son of one Thomas Codd, who is identified in one source as "of Dublin", although without any substantiation.
- ³ Information supplied by Edward T. McCarron.
- ⁴ *Columbian Centinal*, Boston, September 11, 1824.
- ⁵ Kenneth Scott, Comp., *British Aliens in the United States During the War of 1812*, Baltimore, 1979, p. 2. Codd is listed as a resident of Newcastle, Maine, with no family, which was clearly incorrect as witnessed by the records of his marriage and the baptisms of his children. A Thomas Codd, age 28, of Newcastle, also reported to have been in the U. S. sixteen years. He was probably the same Thomas Codd who appears in the 1818 Boston Directory as a housewright. As Nicholas Codd's father's name was supposedly Thomas, then the younger Thomas may have been Nicholas Codd's brother or a son by a previous marriage.
- ⁶ "A Register of Marriages in Boston", Vol. 1, p. 129, Boston City Archives.
- ⁷ "Record of Baptisms at Holy Cross Cathedral, Boston", p. 31.
- ⁸ "Baptisms, Marriages and Burials in the Congregation of St. Mary's Church, County of Lincoln, District of Maine".
- ⁹ The date of 1807 has also been given for Cottrell's house. See James Hall, "Historical Address", above.
- ¹⁰ Edward T. McCarron, "The Irish Merchant Community of Newcastle, Maine, 1780-1830", unpublished paper read at The American Conference on Irish Studies, Newport, Rhode Island, October 7, 1988.
- ¹¹ An early twentieth century post card view of the Butler House is preserved in the collections of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston.
- ¹² Anonymous, "History of St. Patrick's Church, Damariscotta Mills, Maine", typescript at Catholic Chancery, Portland, p. 38.
- ¹³ William L. Lucey, *The Catholic Church in Maine*, Francetown, New Hampshire, 1957, p. 34.
- ¹⁴ There is no documentation that directly links Codd with the building of St. Patrick's. However, given the close connection between Kavanaugh and the church, and the certainty that Codd built Kavanaugh's house, the attribution is entirely credible.
- ¹⁵ A summary of extant documentation on the history of St. Patrick's is found in J. Everett Fowler, Jr., "St. Patrick's Church built at Newcastle in the District of Maine State of Massachusetts Circa 1803-08: Research and Proposals for Restoration", 1970. A copy of the report is at the Catholic Chancery, Portland.
- ¹⁶ Anonymous, "St. Patrick's Church Newcastle, Maine", pamphlet, Damariscotta, Maine, 1958.
- ¹⁷ Fowler.
- ¹⁸ The altar is similar to that of Holy Cross Church (later Cathedral), Boston, consecrated in 1803. These altars are so obviously continental in inspiration as to suggest the taste of the French priests, Fathers Cheverus and Mantignon who were attached to the Boston Parish. See Fowler and Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch*, Cambridge, 1969, p. 164, for a Pendleton lithograph of the interior of Holy Cross Church.



Figure 5. St. Patrick's Church, interior view toward altar, circa 1875 view (MHPC).

¹⁹ Samuel M. Green, *Exhibition of Maine Architecture from the 17th Century to the Civil War*, catalogue, Colby College, Waterville, 1945, and Denys Peter Myers, "The Historic Architecture of Maine", *Maine Catalogue*, Historic American Buildings Survey, Augusta, 1974, pp. 31, 177. The use of pilasters on the facades of the Wood and Kavanaugh Houses was probably inspired by the Silas Lee House in Wiscasset. The Lee House was built as early as 1792 and was the first Federal style house on the mid-Maine coast.

²⁰ The remodeling was undertaken by local amateur architect Alexander Johnson. The front projection was built at that time, but incorporates the original entrance and Palladian window. Rectangular bay windows topped by double-windows were also added. These were removed and replaced by a semblance of the original fenestration as part of a recent restoration. The bracketed window hoods and grooved siding on the facade today also date to 1858. Evidence preserved in a daguerreotype taken in 1858, after the house had been moved back on its lot, shows evidence of a portico. However, this may have been an addition.

²¹ The Thomas McCobb House is commonly known as the "Spite House" due to a supposed dispute between Thomas McCobb and his father's widow over the disposition of the family's Georgian house next door.

²² Myers, pp. 48, 177, 179-80. The house was enlarged and remodeled under the direction of architect Marmaduke Tilden of Philadelphia.

²³ Virginia Chase Perkins, "Stephen Parsons, Country Squire", *Down East Magazine*, October 1958, p. 20.

²⁴ See Fowler. For the McCobb-Nickels family kinship, see *Vital Records of Phippsburg, Maine to the Year 1892*, Auburn, 1935, pp. 92-93, 259.

²⁵ William Nickels to Captain Richard H. Tucker, letter, August 14, 1858, private collection.

²⁶ Ibid. Captain Nickels lost his fortune soon after the house was finished, and it was sold after his death in 1815. After serving as a hotel for many years, the Nickels House was restored as the summer home of the Sortwell family of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who purchased it in 1900. It has been owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities since 1957.

²⁷ William D. Shipman, "The Federal Style", *Maine Forms of American Architecture*, Camden, 1976, p. 75.

²⁸ "Record of Burials Old St. Augustine Cemetery South Boston, 1819-1850".

²⁹ Maurice J. Craig, *Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size*, New York, 1976, pp. 22-23, 40, 106.

³⁰ Curved bays were an early and widespread feature of Irish Georgian houses of all classes (Craig, *passim*.), but similar curved end bays were also prominent features of several late eighteenth-century Philadelphia area houses which Lee would have had the opportunity to see while serving in Congress in 1799-1800.

LIST OF COMMISSIONS IN MAINE ATTRIBUTED TO NICHOLAS CODD

Matthew Cottrill House, Damariscotta, 1801, Attributed, Extant

Nathaniel Butler House, Damariscotta Mills, 1801, Attributed,

Demolished

James Kavanaugh House, Damariscotta Mills, 1803, Extant

St. Patrick's Church, Damariscotta Mills, 1803-08, Extant, Altered

Joseph T. Wood House, Wiscasset, 1804-05, Attributed, Altered

Stephen Parsons House, Edgecomb, 1805-06, Attributed, Extant

Thomas McCobb House, Phippsburg, 1806, Attributed, Altered

William Nickels House, Wiscasset, 1807-11, Attributed, Extant

Abiel Wood, Jr., House, Wiscasset, Begun 1811, Attributed, Extant

Isaac Reed House, Waldoboro, 1814, Attributed, Extant

Volume VI, 1991

Published by

Maine Citizens for Historic Preservation
Box 1198, Portland, Maine 04104

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